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Leadership without 'the led': A case study of the South Wales Valleys

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper aims to disrupt assumptions about leadership by arguing those who are ostensibly 'followers' may be utterly insouciant towards the existence of people categorised as 'leaders'. It contributes to anti-leadership theories.

Design/methodology/approach

This article uses an immersive, highly reflexive methodology to explore subjective meanings of leadership at community levels ostensibly governed by local government leaders. It uses a case study of the South Wales Valleys, one of the hubs of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century but now economically deprived.

Findings

Through drawing on their rich and complex history, I show how in these communities there is a culture of neo-communitarianism that is anti-leadership and suspicious of attempts to establish hierarchies of superior over inferior. I explore the complex webs of meaning through which ancient experiences reverberate like dead metaphors, informing contemporary understandings without conscious awareness of such a heritage. This is a history in which 'leaders' betrayed or oppressed and exploited the population, which in response turned against hierarchies and evolved practices of self-government that continue today, invisible and unrepresentable within the wider culture.

Originality

The article demonstrates how emerging forms of qualitative research give insights into communities that undermine dominant, universalising theories of leadership, followership and government more generally.

Keywords

Wales; leadership; anti-leadership; followership; anti-followership; memory work.

Introduction

This article develops a theory of insouciance towards public service leadership amongst those who are, at least in theory, the beneficiaries of that leadership, the electorate/citizenry/service users. By 'insouciance' is meant indifference, lacking any interest in or concern about an issue. Using a case study of working-class communities in the Eastern Valleys of South Wales, I borrow the Welsh word *gwerin*, or kin/community, as a label for what I will argue are self-governing, leaderless, lived domains that are radically separate from, and suspicious of, the domain of governance. The neo-communitarian philosophy governing the *gwerin* contrasts greatly with presumptions underpinning leadership theory. The *gwerin* understands the public sector to be a provider of services and not a space of governance. Infringement upon the *gwerin* is regarded as interference with the smooth and efficient functioning of work, life and society. 'Leadership' belongs in that other, alien sphere and lacks meaning in the lived domain.

To develop this thesis I draw upon developments in feminist, post-qualitative and post-human research methods and undertake an auto-ethnographic/biographical piece of fringework within the working class communities of the Eastern Valleys of South Wales

in which I grew up and where the rest of my family still live. By 'fringework' I refer to a decentred approach in which the academic researcher is side-lined and the culture she is examining moves to the dominant position – rather than the researcher subject studying the cultural object, the cultural becomes subject, immersing the researcher within itself so that the academic subject disappears.

I position the article's arguments within an emerging sub-discipline of anti-leadership. Leadership studies has, for more than a century, focused on finding the best way in which to carry out leadership (Delaney and Spoelstra, 2019; Wilson, 2019), producing many thousands of texts in an endeavour to achieve that objective. The history of this search begins perhaps with the 'great man' theories that presumed people (usually men) had greatness in their genes. Critique led to contingency approaches that recognised that conditions may influence how a person behaves as a leader, with contingency theories giving way in their time to approaches that assumed leadership could be learned (e.g. transformational leadership theories), a body of work ceding territory, eventually, to contemporary approaches that argue leadership is distributed, emergent and disembodied (Ford, 2010; Wilson, 2016) Critical leadership studies emerged as a response to that search for the ultimate theory of leadership, identifying the problematic status of leadership and arguing that it was and is complicit with capitalism and neo-liberalism (e.g. Collinson, 2005, 2006; Tourish, 2019). Critical leadership studies aims to redeem leadership (Ford, Harding and Learmonth, 2008). There is however an emergent body of research that is *anti*-leadership, i.e. it argues leadership is beyond redemption and should be disposed of. Kelly (2008) for example argues that leadership is a negative ontology, and researchers claiming to study leadership may be perpetuating a category error and

imposing the term on processes that could be described equally well if not better using other labels (Kelly, 2008). Learmonth and Morrell (2017) took up this challenge, illustrating how the terms 'leadership' and 'management' were interchangeable, an argument taken forward in their book (Learmonth and Morrell, 2019), that seeks to purge the term 'leadership' from management studies' vocabulary. Anti-leadership is very much alert to Alvesson and Sveningsson's (2003: 359) warning that 'thinking critically about leadership needs to take seriously the possibility of the non-existence of leadership as a distinct phenomenon'. This article illuminates the non-existence of leadership in a local community.

Methodological approach

My methodological approach is influenced by Law's (2004) critique of 'Euro-American' methodologies that do not allow insight into 'provisionally congealed realities' (p. 155) that emerge in an 'out-thereness' of 'overwhelming, excessive, energetic, …. undecided potentialities, and an ultimately undecidable flux' (p. 144). This echoed Taussig's (1992, 141-42) concerns at lack of understanding of the everyday 'embodied and somewhat automatic "knowledge" that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational' that is vital to making, and making sense of, everyday life. Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2007) addressed these concerns through immersion in the ordinary, everyday quotidian. Stewart's accumulation of numerous observations builds into a powerful indictment of the bleakness and emptiness of much modern American life. But even as I celebrate its methodological innovation I rebel against that bleakness. It washes out, ignores or cannot see the little happinesses as well as the struggles and despair of much everyday, ordinary life. Stewart,

to me, is an observer of an 'out-thereness' rather than a participant in what we could call an 'in-thereness'.

Facilitation of insights into the 'in-thereness' is made possible by academics mining their own experiences. Through 'memory work' involving analysis of her family photograph album Kuhn's (1995) in-depth study of British working class life in the second half of the 20th Century is achieved through her analysis of her family's photograph album. Eribon's (2013) *Returning to Reims* is a similar study of French working class life from someone who, immersed in it in childhood, can now turn his skilled sociological lens remorselessly upon himself and the family from which he struggled to escape, using an insider/outsider gaze. Finally, Angel (2014) undertakes a forensic analysis of herself as a processual, poststructural self in process of ongoing becoming, grasping it as lived experience rather than abstract theory or external observation.

Together these academics authorise a move towards immersive, hyper-reflective methodologies, or 'quiet and more generous versions of methods' (Law, 2004, p. 156) that do not bleach clean and then neatly tidy the fluid, messy, contradictory, elusive, molecular, multiple quotidian. 'Rigour', 'objectivity' and 'detachment' are abjured, because they put a straitjacket on knowledge (Law, 2004). The researcher instead combines academic skills (abilities in interrogating the taken-for-granted and seeing through the superficial to deeper realities) with that of the novelist ('come with me and immerse yourself in this world') (Harding, 2013). I thus apply a sociologically-informed interrogation of my own experience of being both an insider and an outsider to the community in which I grew up and which I, in many ways, 'left' when I went to university at the age of 27. My approach involves an account of moments of encounter

(following Stewart) with my family. Some are recent, others follow Kuhn and Didion in being recalled from childhood. It is from the perspective of the Welsh working class home understood through an academic sensibility that I offer a theory of insouciance towards leadership.

Firstly: the class position of this 'me' who writes. I'm the oldest of seven siblings born in the South Wales Valleys in the UK in the second half of the 20th century. Our father was a coal-miner, our mother a frustrated housewife who yearned to be a nurse. Of these seven children, all left school at the first opportunity, although two of us later went to university. I am the only one who has a middle class occupation. I lived in the north of England from 1996-2017, visiting my family every school holiday. In 2017 I returned to a very different Wales from the one I had left 22 years before: it is a country experiencing what can be called 'Celtic postcolonialism'. That is, it was the first nation to be subjected to English colonialism, was for 700 years a colony of England, but was at the same time a contributor to and beneficiary of the British Empire. Today, it emerges from that long history more sure of its Welshness.

What follows is influenced by Stewart's *Ordinary Affect:* a series of seemingly random observations build into a narrative. But it is also mimetic of Celtic ways of story-telling. The *Mabinogion* (Guest, 1849/2016) or ancient Welsh texts, are a series of inter-connected stories with no beginning, no middle and no end; each story relates to other stories, and characters wander in and out of each, picking up threads of some stories, leaving others unfinished. This Celtic approach regards linearity as a colonial imposition. Each story has a purpose (of sorts). The first illuminates how what is said can be very different from what is meant or what is thought.

The pub lunch and the Brexit bombshell

April 2019: with five of my six siblings eating lunch[1] at an old coaching inn in Crickhowell. I asked 'what do you think of Brexit preparations?' Two of my sisters, not looking up from their food, repeated over and over, 'our vote must be honoured',. Another sister and a brother did not know what to think: they were confused, did not understand what was happening, and just wanted the whole thing to be over and done with. The two of us who have university degrees argued in favour of another vote. The discussions became heated: we called a halt as distress levels mounted.

Opinions (including my own) were voiced with passion: rational thought was absent. In the place of thought was sheer, unadulterated, emotional conviction. There is no insight in regard to leadership whatsoever in this incident; no names (or 'influencers') were mentioned. Rather, I start with this vignette because it shows how everyday conversations are replete with barely-articulated theories that travel through the generations, much as do dead metaphors in living languages. The history of ideas I trace is one that is unwritten, its records contained deep in the psyches of speakers. This is a sensory history of feelings passed down through the materialities of generations, and it is this history that facilitates development of a theory of insouciance towards leadership.

<u>The South-Wales Valleys</u>

The United Kingdom (the nations of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) has a population of 66.04 million, with Wales's 3,113,200 just 4.8% of the total. Its small size

[1] 'Lunch' is an alien word that I learned to use when I went to university as a mature student aged 27. It is otherwise known as 'dinner'.

belies its position as a crucible of the first Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. A quadrupling of its population in the 19th century occurred largely in the South Wales Valleys, rich in the coal and iron ore necessary for the Industrial Revolution. The terrain is of 'deeply scored valleys running down from high upland plateaux under the Beacons where God had clearly never intended human beings to live until the ironmasters corrected Him on the point. Those human beings struggled out of company towns in a mauled, moon-mountain landscape against all the odds to create some of the most remarkable working-class communities in Britain' (Williams, 1985, p. 185). From the 1820s the Valleys' natural resources were ruthlessly exploited. Williams describes the Rhondda Valleys of the 1850s as like the Klondyke, for by this time the rate of immigration was exceeded only by migration into the USA. The human inflow (Williams again) became 'almost unmanageable, throwing up communities everywhere, breeding semi-pirate and bohemian districts outside the law, a beady-eyed and enterprising middle class, speculators, jerry-builders, crooks, swarmed in' (p. 186). By the 1870s 'the whole region was thickly colonised' and 'the country had become, alongside Lancashire, one of the first truly industrial societies in the world, and like Lancashire, it nested at the heart of an imperial economy' (Williams, p. 201). The 'ruthlessly exploited' population spoke Welsh (one of the oldest living languages in Europe). We have only the faintest hints of this language in my family's memories: my mother could understand Welsh but not speak it. My large, extended family are all monoglot English speakers.

The Valleys population experienced nightmarish working conditions and life expectancy was short in the 19th century, but the culture was vibrant, the population politically active.

Secret societies fought for workers' rights. One, the Scotch Cattle, policed greedy landlords and employers, and also the community's morality. The Children of Rebecca rendered South-West Wales ungovernable by formal agencies in the 1840s, and they too policed the community. I wonder if they are the originator of the *gwerin* as I describe it below? Or rather, that the continued circulation of stories about them inform identity-work in the Valleys today. The heavy industries now disappeared, the boom towns of the 19th century are now some of the poorest in Europe. I've described too briefly the heritage that resonates like dead metaphors in contemporary Valleys thought, but that sensorium draws on an earlier Welsh history, that of a colonized people.

750 years of colonialism?

My grandsons, then aged 13 and 9, were visiting me in Leeds in the north of England. We'd spent an afternoon at the local skate park. They discussed new moves with local boys, trying them out, learning from each other, and generally having a great time. As we left, my younger grandson screwed his face up into a deep thought, and observed, with much surprise, that the boys they'd spent the afternoon with were English (or rather Ing-er-lish) but they were, well, okay. Just like their friends back in Merthyr in fact.

Dylan is not unique in his surprise that the 'Ing-er-lish' are human – there is a visceral dislike of the English within the Welsh population. Contemporary analyses suggest this arises from having been England's first colonial conquest. Only now, 700 years later, is Wales regaining independence of thought and feeling, but not of law. 'Wales was

England's first colony. Its conquest was by military force and led to a process of colonisation whereby the Welsh were denied what today would be called civil rights' (Johnes, 2019, p. 2). This happened after Edward 1st of England, having conquered the last of the Welsh princes, issued a statute at Rhuddlan in March 1284 that laid down how the 'conquered territory' of Wales was to be governed. This 'first colonial constitution' (Cam, 1962, in Evans and Fulton, 2019, p. 20) was followed by a century of uprisings that ended in 1409 with a revolt led by Owain Glyn Dwr, still celebrated today as a Welsh hero.

The importance to contemporary identities of this history is spelt out by Johnes (2019). The exact truths of history are irrelevant, he argues; what is important is what people think, and tales of colonisation give the Welsh an account that inspires them to 'retain their sense of difference and distinctiveness. It gave them stories to understand who they were and to be inspired and angered by. It ensured that the Welsh never started to think of themselves as English' (p. 9). Seven centuries of history spoke through my grandson, compressed into a few phrases about loathing the English, with what was originally conscious become unconscious (Johnes, 2019, p. 11) so that they/we now know only that to be Welsh requires that we are anti-English.

Wales, a colonised nation, has been complicit in the British Empire's colonisation of others. I've been struck by accounts of how uprisings against the English crown led, after defeat, to Welsh people with what might today be called 'leadership skills' taking up lucrative positions in the service of the conquerors. Is there a trace memory of these

betrayals within the contemporary population's understanding of itself, I wonder? This, along with the exploitation by the owner/manager class in the 19th century, may explain the visceral dislike of authority that I next explore, arising from being made to feel inferior.

Post-colonial theory (e.g. Jack and Westwood, 2009; Liu, 2020) does not capture the complexities of this colonial heritage I am observing. The Celtic fringe nations have very different histories, some of which is being explored in the arts and humanities in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but a coherent body of Celtic postcolonial theory is yet to emerge (Jack, 2020, personal communication; Kenny, 2020, personal communication). I am thus coining a term, Celtic postcolonialism/decolonialism, that, as yet, requires study.

Memories from childhood: my father singing, to the tune of the Red Flag, 'the working class can kiss my arse, I've got the foreman's job at last'. My father dismissing socialist politics, because 'you get rid of one lot of bosses and they will be replaced by another lot'. I learned, many years later, that Jacques Lacan had said something very similar about the perpetuation of bosses.

These memories exemplify the deep suspicion of hierarchies, and thus leadership, that circulate within and through the discourses that inform identity work amongst Valleys people. This suspicion is the biggest influence on my own academic interests, although I had thought, until drafting this article, that I had come to the ideas only after my induction into academia. My experience of growing up in the Valleys, I recognise now, was an experience of those feelings of inferiority familiar to many colonised peoples

(Fanon, 1952/1970). England is bigger, richer, and some Britons revel in a myth of English superiority. *I was taught in my 1960s classroom to be proud of the British empire. The atlases used in the geography lessons contained maps in which countries that were or had been part of Britain's empire were coloured in pink. There were so many countries coloured pink! I learned, almost through osmosis it seems, that the British Empire was a fundamentally moral endeavour concerned with taking civilisation to the farthest corners of the world.* Welsh people can be simultaneously and paradoxically seduced and repelled by notions of Britain's (supposed) exceptionalism: although articulated by the loathed English, it's a sentiment that is as much part of Welsh as of English history. A paradoxical sense of both superiority and inferiority brings peculiar challenges to anyone who would be a leader, a paradox magnified through the prism of class.

From working to middle class and back again; or from neo-communitarian to left-liberal and back again.

The results of the Brexit vote were announced on Friday 24th June 2016. A few days later I was at a writing retreat with colleagues who shared feelings of numbed grief. In contrast, some of my relatives were jubilant. The relative with whom I most discuss politics argued that migrant workers were driving down wages and denying jobs to local youths, and were not as hard-working as stories about them suggested. In this he articulated a classical law of supply and demand, but my response was that his arguments were racist, and I felt dismayed that such a close relative could have such unenlightened opinions. But, as Irwin (2018:214) notes, non-academics can be 'nuanced analysts of social structural processes, and articulate a more coherent and detailed

conception than implied by much literature in the area (Irwin, 2018:214). This is not a surprise (see Harding, 2013, for a similar argument) but it is necessary to explore why I, like many left-leaning liberals, interpreted my relative's words so negatively.

At the writing retreat I read an email distributed by fellow critical scholars. It complained about the awful working class that had unthinkingly voted for Brexit, as the analyses in the immediate aftermath of the vote were suggesting. My first, unbidden thought was 'walk a mile in their shoes before you criticise them'. My second thought was: where did that thought come from?' Analysis of my identities suggest that immediate response came from my working class self that re-experienced an earlier sense of being belittled by 'the middle class'. A few months later I experienced another flash of recognition while hearing the playwright David Hare discussing the demanding norms of his middle class childhood. This was a recognition of how my years in academia had moved me into a middle class subject position, replete with a certain left-liberal philosophy. I had to climb down from my academic high-horse when I next debated politics with my relatives.

What, then, are the norms of Western liberalism that inform the professional middle-class 'I' and makes it blind and deaf to other possibilities of becoming 'I'. These I found embedded within the left-leaning, liberal UK newspapers, the Guardian and Observer. There is a casual use of the 'we' in these newspapers. An example plucked at random was Aaron Hicklin's interview of Thomas Page McBee on 5th August 2018[2]. Referring to Obama's time in office, he wrote 'As we all know now, whatever optimism we felt then

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/aug/05/my-fight-to-be-a-man

was about to be upended by Brexit and the election of Trump'. In this casual use of the 'we' that had felt 'optimism' but now has knowledge, a global 'we', through its extension in the 'all', positions readers in that 'we' that is enlightened. It constructs the Brexit/Trump voters as destroyers; ignores the fact that large swathes of two populations may not have been feeling optimistic; and pits the 'we' against the unnamed, destructive other. It invites me, the reader of a newspaper designed for educated, left-leaning readers, to align myself with the 'all' and against this seemingly malign voting other. Academic discussions are not immune from such rhetorical and constitutive use of language and may indeed be characterized by such positioning.

In other words, an educated and articulated group unthinkingly *others* those whose philosophy and politics they assume differs from it. This othering, in this example, is achieved through eliding with an entire, vaguely-defined 'class' ignorance, racism and gullibility. This construction is the constitutive other of a class that identifies itself as educated, articulate and liberal.

Liberalism is understood as an ideal in which liberty, equality, state neutrality and voluntarism are valorised (McCabe, 2010). It emphasises respect for the Other and inclusivity (Brooks, 2017, p. 136). Freedom of movement is fundamental to liberal philosophy (Freiman and Hidalgo, 2016), an issue that represents the fracture line in the Brexit campaign. But, exploring the failure of the Welsh to establish themselves as a nation state, Brooks (2017, p. 131) argues that liberalism is 'an ideology which at its very heart discriminates against minorities'. My experience of zigzagging between two identities suggests that, more than this, liberalism is a form of thought that is intolerant of

dissent, quick to judge as inferior anyone who dissents with their worldview. The disregard is returned in kind by that 'inferior' other.

This is how I now understand my own intolerance towards my relative's concerns about how the cost of labour is driven down in the Valleys with the classical capitalist strategy of ensuring supply of labour outstrips demand. Is this not a philosophy that informs much leadership theory? That is, the assumption that the majority of people need to be led relegates that majority to a position where they are denied the power of self-definition, of pride, or agency. They are inferior. Class must inform much of this theory, even though it is never articulated as such. Thus leadership theory is illiberally liberal.

Pethau cyffredin

I do not speak Welsh but I want to appropriate Stewart's term 'ordinary affect' while keeping some distance from it. *'Pethau cyffredin'*, an on-line translator tells me, is Welsh for 'ordinary things'. What follows first is a list of ordinary things observed in childhood and adulthood that resonate.

Firstly, a distrust of authority. My father's ditty, repeated above, describes what happens when people become bosses: they abandon their convictions and become as bad as all their predecessors. This cynicism about management was exemplified in *1986, when returning to work after the year-long miner's strike my then-husband recounted the stupidity of the managers and the jokes made by the miners at management's expense. Managers hadn't changed, they were just as useless after the strike as they had been before it.* Flash forward to c. 2012: *my elder son, a nurse, was appalled that a fellow*

nurse he met when visiting me in Leeds had called him a manager: he saw it as an accusation. Managers are regarded as interfering in the smooth running of things; they get in the way and don't know what they are doing.

That distrust is echoed in cynicism about politicians. During the referendum in 1979 concerning the establishment of devolved government to Wales, *I joined in discussions in the village shop, at the bus stop and within the family that revolved around the cost of such an assembly. It would provide 'jobs for the boys' (privileged insiders). They were an unnecessary cost: rather than pay them to do little ['sweet bugger all' in the vernacular] better to use the money elsewhere.* The vote was 4:1 against devolution. A second referendum in 1997 saw a narrow majority 'yes' vote of 50.3%, on a turnout of just 50.2% of registered voters. The first years of the Assembly were dogged by political infighting and scandals, with numerous calls for its disbanding, leaving one commentator to observe that only in Wales would politicians' shortcomings be used to argue for the abolition of a democratically-elected national government (Shipton, 2011).

This lack of trust in, and respect for, 'leaders' is part of a culture of self-government and self-policing. *In the 1950s and 60s my father, a coal miner and trained first-aider responsible for providing immediate help to fellow miners injured while cutting coal, was the first person called to help anyone in the village injured in an accident. The doctor or ambulance was called if he advised it.*

C. 2010: *an impromptu family gathering at a local pub, a sudden bustle of discussion after which a group of male relatives left. A niece had been beaten badly by her boyfriend. He had broken an unwritten law: men do not beat women. Those who break that law get*

summary treatment: a beating. 2019: *neighbours in a local village were bothered by 'rowdy youths' gouging cars' paintwork and scaring people walking down the street at night. The police had been called but had 'done nothing'. Some of the biggest men in the village gave them a 'quiet talking to': the trouble stopped. 2019: memory stirred by seeing mountain ponies grazing in a field, one of my sisters recalled how the men of her village beat up someone who had let his horses starve to death, a local justice acclaimed by neighbours.*

I do not want to romanticise this self-reliance: it can be intolerant and damaging. *I grew up with a deep sense of shame because our family home was dirty: cleanliness is superior to Godliness in the Welsh Valleys. One of my sisters still smarts from being verbally abused by older women in the village when she became an unmarried mother in the 1980s, and today there continues to be much gossip about women who are judged to be poor housewives.* But what I am observing are norms of self-government, with groups forming to deal with issues as they arise. Management (and thus leadership) is despised. I suspect Valleys people would say there is nothing interesting in this analysis: it's just the way things are done, they might say, so obvious that it does not need telling. But these and other examples of '*pethau cyffredin*' illuminate the low esteem afforded to anyone who attempts to take on a leadership mantle. The 700 years of history summarised above have left a sense that there is no betrayal, no selling out, when things are done collectively.

There is a long history of doing things collectively. The Protestant, non-conformist chapels found in every town and village in the Valleys in the 19th century were organised non-hierarchically, with local people acting as preachers, organisers of weekly worship,

and keeping the chapel running (Moon, 2019, personal communication). Distrust of officialdom reverberates through commemorations of the Merthyr Rising of 1831, perhaps the first occasion when a red flag was used as a workers' symbol. The army was called in to control the riots, 24 protesters were killed and Dic Penderyn, a 23-year-old miner, was charged with injuring a soldier and sentenced to be hung (Brookes 2017). Pubs are named after him, and the Merthyr Rising is commemorated in an annual 'cultural festival of music, arts, political discussion and ideas' that 'celebrates working class culture and resistance at the birthplace of the red flag' (http://www.merthyrrising.uk/about.html).

The radical politics of the 20th century did however have major successes, notably the establishment of a system of support from 'cradle to grave'. Aneurin Bevan, the politician who established the National Health Service, came from Tredegar, a town in these valleys. I have noticed some other p*ethau cyffredin* in my siblings' talk. *When my sisters and I gather the conversation usually turns to accounts of the people they know. I listen, an anthropologist observing how a group of matriarchs construct their worlds. Complex connections are drawn – 'you know, she's XXXX's daughter, the one who was married to YYY but now she's married to ZZZZ'.* Many of my siblings are now dependent on state benefits for survival. The long local history of despising 'scroungers' persists, but a community distinction is drawn now between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients of state benefits Those with a 'just' right to benefits regard them as that: a right. Civil servants responsible for handling claims for benefits are talked about not as if they are employed to assess claims, but as difficult and unpredictable barriers to fairness and equality. They are 'outsiders' who unfairly disrupt the lives of those 'inside' the

community. There is no place for leadership here – those who have learned to manoeuvre their way through the system offer help to others.

One issue remains to be explored: the complex mixture of pride and inferiority that emerges through class and language. Pride is related to insouciance in regard to leadership (it's not needed so why bother our heads about it, as Valleys people might say), while inferiority inculcates resistance towards leadership because it elevates some above others, adding another superior/inferior binary.

Pride/inferiority; class/language

The Valleys communities are proudly working class: being labelled 'middle class' is to be slurred. But, assimilated into England even while keeping its sense of identity, the Welsh culture is not immune to constructions of the working class as the middle class's inferior other. So along with pride there is a complex sense of inferiority. Kuhn's eloquent description of being a working class child who attended a middle class grammar school throws me back into my squirming childhood self sent by her mother to tell the rent collector 'Mammy isn't in this week. Can you come back next week?' Kuhn's words will suffice as description and explanation. 'Class', Kuhn writes, (1995, p. 116) is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being. In the all-encompassing English class system, if you know that you are in the 'wrong' class, you know that therefore you are a valueless person'. That is, there is 'something shameful and wrong about you, that you are inarticulate and stupid, have nothing to say of any value or importance, that no-one will listen to you in any case,

that you are undeserving, unentitled, cannot think properly, are incapable of 'getting it right'. …And you learn that these feelings may return to haunt you for the rest of your life' (ibid). Those of us who are working class learn not to speak, we learn to be silent 'through shame'.

In the Valleys class inferiority intertwines with class pride and the complex history of a colonised people divided by the country's two languages. The Welsh language lost any official status in an Act of Union in 1536 but nevertheless flourished. It was thriving in the Valleys in the mid-19th century but by 1900 was in retreat, partly through deliberate policy. An infamous commission reported on the state of education in Wales in 1847 that its encouragement of Welsh-speaking produced a race that was 'ignorant', 'lazy', and 'immoral'. Abolishing Welsh was seen as a moral imperative. The language withered, and almost disappeared from the Valleys, but did not die. Today about 20% of the population remain Welsh speakers and the language is reviving. Morning assembly was held in Welsh on Friday mornings in the grammar school I attended, although few of us could understand it. In chapel on Sundays we sang some Welsh and some English hymns. We learned to sing the national anthem in Welsh without understanding the meaning of the words although feeling the emotions it aroused. We sang hymns by William Williams Pantycelyn (great tunes but we did not know what the sentences meant), sensed that the words of Ar Hyd y Nos (All through the Night) must mean something beautiful, and that Rhyfelgyrch Gwyr Harlech (Men of Harlech) was a call to arms. We knew that Sosban Fach was supposed to be funny and we guessed that the chorus referred to Johnny Bach (little Johnny) being scratched by a cat. Welsh was there in place names and personal names: it was everywhere but we could not speak it. The result? Williams describes my

own experience of growing up as a monoglot English speaker, albeit using a dialect that overlays English semantics on a Welsh syntax and that can be almost impenetrable to those not accustomed to hearing it. He writes that in the second half of the 20th century there was 'mutual alienation' between English- and Welsh-speakers, with the majority of the population, unable to speak Welsh, 'perceived as in some basic senses, un-Welsh' and unable to account for their identity.

That is, Valleys people definitely were not English; we were fiercely proud of being Welsh. But we could not speak Welsh, so were we really Welsh? And if we weren't Welsh and weren't English, than who were we? In confusion we othered Welsh speakers, for reasons that lack all justification and are indeed unfathomable, save that we felt inferior towards native Welsh speakers because they could truly call themselves Welsh and we could not.

It was only when reading Simon Brooks' *Why Wales never was* (2017), translated from the original Welsh, that I learned native Welsh speakers felt similar ambivalence and envy towards the monoglot peoples of South Wales. He writes (p. 110-11) that '"Non-Welsh-speaking Welsh"' is now a 'normative, and indeed dominant, Welsh identity' that can threaten the right of Welsh-speakers to be Welsh. It seems Welsh- and non-Welsh speaking Welsh people alike are uncertain of their identities, but each assumes the other is not beset by such contradictions. His book is in some ways alienating: his study of the failure of Welsh nationalism is a study of men, and only educated men. He seems often to use the term 'the Welsh' to refer only to Welsh-speaking people, arousing in me that old

enmity and old sense of uncertainty of identity. But he also offers a nuanced understanding of the binds in which Welsh- and non-Welsh speaking working class people alike are 'oppressed as a social class and as a nationality', an ethnic minority in the wider Britain (p. 130). What Brooks misses in his analysis, insightful though it is, is understanding of a Valleys culture that may not speak Welsh words, but whose language, constructed on the syntax of that ancient tongue, is saturated with *Cymraeg (*the Welsh word for the Welsh language).

Discussion but not yet a conclusion

Imagine now, sitting at a kitchen table in one of the towns and villages of the East Wales Valleys and thinking about leaders and leaderships. I will pass you a list of words, from Word Hippo[3], that mean 'leader' in Welsh. They range from arweinydd, arweinyddion, benadur, benaduriaid, blaenwr, blaenwraig, blaenwyr, dywyswer, dywyswyr, dywysydd, flaenwr, flaenwyr, harweinydd, harweinyddion, mhenadur, and so on to thywyswyr, thywysydd, tywyswr, tywyswyr and twysydd. It will be a rare reader of this article who understands what these words mean and the subtle distinctions between them (I surely don't). But what the above argument suggests is that the terms 'leader' and 'leadership', and even more 'follower' and 'followership', carry as little meaning in the Valleys of South East Wales as these Welsh terms do to a monoglot English readership. That is, the English terms are as alien as the Welsh ones. They do not belong amongst people who resent those who elevate themselves into supposed positions of authority: life is better lived with everyone 'doing their bit' (contributing according to their abilities) and not

[3] https://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the/welsh-word-for-b25f598744d2fedc95944f9c35b697828e50ed10.html

adding unnecessary overhead costs. Local government provides services, and service providers equally should 'do their bit' and not set themselves up as arbiters of other's entitlements.

Underlying this philosophy are vulnerabilities and contradictions that are threatened and challenged by such concepts as leadership. Leadership suggests some are better than others, and carries with it hints of a colonialism that has been sensed and resisted. The history of these peoples, rooted in centuries-long struggles against colonialism, class, ethnic and capitalist exploitation, echoes through the everyday lived experience of the *gwerin*. Centuries of learning not to rely on leaders and of realising the need to be self-sufficient, reverberate through a culture that is neo-communitarian. To insert leadership and followership into such an alien culture would be a further act of colonization, but one that would not so much be resisted as treated with disdain and an insouciant disregard for its pretensions ('who do they think they are, thinking they know better than us'). That is, 'leadership' is rooted in a (neo-)liberal perspective that is antithetical to a neo-communitarian philosophy. The language of leadership could silence speakers, turning them into subalterns who cannot speak, that is, people whose language and ideas is not heard by those who speak a different language. Insouciant towards pretensions of leadership, they are unrepresentable within leadership theory (they cannot exist so cannot be described). I suspect that they would not care.

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